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Shortgrass Country

by Monte Noelke

After the holidays an icy fog intermingled with mist and rain covered the Shortgrass Country. The damp, dreary weather put us all on edge. We are a dust storm and bright sunshine breed of people. To us, wisps of dew and partial shades seem like clammy, overcast weather.

As the moisture increased and the strange spell of weather held on, feed runs were all but shut down. Herders were learning fast to respect the deep ruts, sinkholes full of rainwater and the overflow from playa lakes.

Mud chains, cleated tires and four-wheel drive vehicles were helping the operators that were interested in making one-way trips from their feed barns to the worst mudholes on their farthest boundaries. But for us who were already experiencing shortness of breath from pulling through mud from saddle shed to oat granary, patience was the byword.

Hombres calving out heifers were really in from trouble. The first lesson a cow brute learns about motherhood is to hide out when she needs help to deliver. On those still grey mornings, just finding the ranch roads and staying on them was enough of a challenge without having to seine a black heifer out of that soupy mist.

But the reason I said it was a strange spell of weather wasn't because of the cows or the cowboys sticking their pickups in the mud. Our puzzle was that when the new hand's sheep dog had her pups on a foggy morning, they didn't open their eyes until the sun broke out, which was way past the normal time for puppies to be blind.

We'll have to wait to know whether those valuable dogs will have normal vision. A lot of the saucer hounds we've had in the past were never alert enough to take an eye test. However, if we have started a new strain of fog-eyed dogs, we can use them next winter to help find our cattle in bad weather.